



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT EVALUATING PLUM CREEK TIMBER COMPANY'S NATIVE FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN AND ALTERNATIVES

December 16, 1999

“Good habitat conservation planning preserves for future generations the quality of life we treasure by allowing a thriving economy to coexist with a healthy and sustainable environment.”

— Bruce Babbitt, Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Q. What is an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)?

An EIS is a document required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to inform the public of the effects a major federal action may have on the environment. It must reveal the known or predictable environmental effects of any proposed major action, as well as effects of other alternative actions that are being considered or compared. This information is released twice to the public: first as a draft so people can provide comments or additional information, then as a final. All the information then is considered by the agency in its decision-making process.

Plum Creek Timber Company has asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service (the Services) to consider issuing an Incidental Take Permit to Plum Creek under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Services have prepared a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) to analyze the potential impacts of issuing a permit, and to assist in their decision whether to issue a permit to Plum Creek.

Q. What is a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)?

A Habitat Conservation Plan (under Section 10(a)(2)(A) of the ESA), is a long-term conservation plan established under the ESA.

An approved HCP allows a private landowner to incidentally take listed species, provided adequate measures are enacted that allow for long-term survival and recovery of the species. An approved HCP must

accompany an application for an Incidental Take Permit. The HCP would ensure that impacts resulting from take are minimized and mitigated to the maximum extent practicable. Landowners managing their lands under an HCP usually provide species conservation while continuing with economic development activities (e.g. timber harvest), with the right to alter some habitat, engage in incidental take, and gain certainty in managing their lands.

Q. What is “Take?”

“Take” is defined in the ESA as any action that would “harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect” any endangered or threatened species. Harm may include significant habitat modification that actually kills or injures a listed species.

Q. What is an “Incidental Take Permit,” and who needs one?

An incidental Take Permit is a permit issued under the ESA which enables private landowners to “take” (kill, harm, etc.) federally listed species, so long as the “take” occurs incidentally to an otherwise lawful activity; does not appreciably reduce the likelihood of survival and recovery of the species in the wild; and certain other requirements are met such as development of an adequate HCP and a commitment to fund its implementation. “Take” which may result from harvest of habitat occupied by federally listed species can be legally authorized under the conditions of an incidental take permit.

Anyone who believes that their “otherwise lawful activities” will result in the incidental take of a listed species needs a permit. FWS or NMFS can help determine whether a proposed project is likely to result intake and whether an HCP is an option to consider. The Services may also provide technical assistance to help design a project that would avoid take.

Q. What is the benefit of an Incidental Take Permit/Habitat Conservation Plan to a private landowner?

Incidental take permits and HCPs allow a landowner to proceed legally with an activity that may otherwise result in illegal take of a listed species. These tools available under the ESA provide a landowner with increased regulatory certainty regarding the kinds of activities that can be legally conducted on private land, and help the landowner better achieve business goals. An HCP also allows the landowner to determine how best to meet the agreed-upon fish and wildlife management goals.

THE PLUM CREEK NATIVE FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN (NFHCP)

Q. What is the Plum Creek Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan (NFHCP)?

The proposed Plum Creek Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan addresses the effects Plum Creek Timber Company’s activities may have on native aquatic species on their lands. The NFHCP includes seven sets of conservation measures to be implemented if the permit is approved, designed to minimize and mitigate the effects of Plum Creek’s management actions on 17 native salmonid fish species on their lands in Montana, Idaho and Washington. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service (Services) jointly prepared the Draft EIS to evaluate Plum Creek’s NFHCP. Both documents are available for public review and comment.

Q. What lands are proposed to be covered under the permit? How large is the area?

The plan area includes 1.7 million acres of Plum Creek lands in Montana, Idaho and Washington. About 85% of this land is in western Montana, 8% in Idaho, and 7% in Washington (1,462,000 acres in Montana, 132,000 acres in Idaho and 85,000 acres in Washington). The DEIS evaluates potential impacts over an area of 17 million acres, and includes other federal and private lands adjacent to Plum Creek lands. The Plum Creek NFHCP is the first comprehensive NFHCP in the northern Rockies.

Q. What are the biological goals of the NFHCP?

Plum Creek has indicated that the NFHCP will adopt a multi-species, aquatic ecosystem approach spanning all watersheds in the plan area to protect native fish and aquatic species. The intent of using an aquatic ecosystem approach is to address biological concerns of native and aquatic species in the area and remove threats to the species and/or their habitat. The Services provided technical assistance to Plum Creek to develop an NFHCP that strives to meet biological goals based on the “Four C’s” of habitat quality for all native salmonids: Cold (stream temperatures), Clean (in-stream sediment levels), Complex (in-stream habitat diversity) and Connected (restoration of connectivity among sub-populations of native fish).

Q. What activities are covered by the permit?

Covered activities include timber management and associated land management activities such as land sales, road building, road maintenance, land use planning and livestock grazing.

Q. What species are affected?

The proposed plan includes conservation measures for 17 native fish species that would be covered by the permit, including eight endangered and threatened species.

RESIDENT FRESHWATER SPECIES

*Columbia River Basin bull trout DPS (*Salvelinus confluentus*)

Redband trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

Coastal rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

Southwestern Washington/Columbia River coastal cutthroat trout DPS (*Oncorhynchus clarki clarki*) — includes anadromous form

Westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*)

Mountain whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*)

Pygmy whitefish (*Prosopium coulteri*)

ANADROMOUS SPECIES

*Snake River steelhead ESU (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

*Mid-Columbia River steelhead ESU (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

*Lower Columbia River steelhead ESU (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

*Snake River spring/summer chinook salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)

*Snake River fall chinook salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)

Upper Columbia River summer/fall chinook salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)

Mid-Columbia River chinook salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)

*Lower Columbia River chinook salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)

Lower Columbia River/Southwest Washington coho salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*)

*Columbia River chum salmon ESU (*Oncorhynchus keta*)

***Threatened or Endangered Species**

Q. What did the Services require of Plum Creek’s NFHCP to be adequate for public review?

The Services required Plum Creek to submit a completed application package and HCP. The package required a demonstration of the fact that “take” would be incidental, that impacts would be minimized and mitigated to the maximum extent practicable, and that the plan would be adequately funded. In addition, the Services needed a clear demonstration of how the proposed conservation measures would allow for, or not preclude, recovery of permit species.

Q. What habitat conservation measures are addressed by the NFHCP?

Plum Creek has proposed 53 specific conservation commitments within seven major categories, including: Road and Upland, Riparian, Range Management, Land Use Planning, Legacy and Restoration, Administration and Adaptive Management. The Services sought a broad array of conservation measures and Plum Creek incorporated unique commitments, including reducing impacts to native fish from: livestock grazing, historic land management impacts, or from potential development by limiting land sales.

Q. What is the net effect of the proposed conservation commitments?

The effect of Plum Creek's combined NFHCP commitments would be to provide a positive trend in improvement of habitat quality for the "Four C's" over time. This rate is more than could be achieved without Plum Creek's proposed conservation commitments, but is less than might be achieved if lands were managed less intensively than proposed by Plum Creek. Through adaptive management, conservation measures could be adjusted to help ensure an adequate rate of improvement in habitat quality.

Q. Why did Plum Creek choose to build on existing state forest management regulations in their NFHCP?

Whether Plum Creek obtains a permit from the Services or not, they are still required to obey state law, including state forest management regulations. So, Plum Creek began with the assumption that they would have to continue to implement these regulations. The Services are concerned, however, about the ability of state forest regulations to adequately conserve permit species. Therefore, Plum Creek, through their NFHCP, is offering additional conservation commitments to supplement state regulations in those instances where additional conservation may be most necessary.

Q. How long would the Permit be valid for, and why?

Plum Creek's proposed NFHCP permit period is 30 years. However, the DEIS also analyzes shorter Permit periods of 10 and 20 years. The longer the permit period, the more time is available for conservation benefits to accrue. For example, reducing sediment delivery to streams allows increasing benefits to native fish over time, and more time allows trees near streams to grow bigger, also benefiting fish habitat. With longer permits, however, comes an increased likelihood that new information will become available on species' habitat requirements that could require additional conservation commitments. Adaptive management would address this.

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Q. What if the Plan does not adequately conserve species on Plum Creek lands?

If, through plan monitoring or incorporation of other credible scientific information it is clear that implementation of the plan is not sufficient to adequately conserve habitat for the covered species on Plum Creek lands, and actions taken under the HCP are affecting the species more adversely than predicted, then Plum Creek would be required to adapt their management to ensure that adequate conservation is provided.

Q. What if better science comes along after the Permit is issued?

A unique part of the NFHCP is that credible scientific information from any sources can be incorporated into the plan, giving it broad flexibility for *adaptive management*. If the conservation commitments in the NFHCP are not producing the desired habitat results, Plum Creek would be required to work with the Services to change, or adapt, management to achieve the results. Also, if better solutions for conserving fish habitat are found, Plum Creek and the Services may choose to adapt management to allow for such new solutions.

Q. What if Plum Creek sells their land?

The NFHCP contains a set of Land Use and Legacy planning commitments to provide incentives to improve the certainty of long term conservation on lands that are sold. Deed restrictions would be required with the sale of certain lands, and unrestricted land sales without a permit amendment would be limited.

Q. How will the sale of the St. Joe River properties affect the NFHCP?

The St. Joe River properties represent only about 5% of the NFHCP lands. The DEIS would look at the differences in conservation provided in the project as a whole as compared to those lands analyzed in the DEIS to determine whether the requirements for the permit were still being met.

PEER REVIEW AND PUBLIC INPUT

Q. Was all the scientific research peer-reviewed, and by whom?

The Services and Plum Creek sought to use peer-reviewed scientific data whenever possible throughout this project. Plum Creek solicited and incorporated peer review from outside their company on their 13 technical reports. They also enlisted several scientists from outside their company to help develop their NFHCP. The Services sought comment from scientific experts from other agencies. During the public comment period for this project, the Services solicited review and comment by scientists from four different professional organizations.

Q. How was the public involved in developing this NFHCP?

The Services and Plum Creek were involved in over 150 meetings and discussions with interested individuals, organizations, agencies, and Native American tribes throughout the plan development. Plum Creek also published and made available 13 technical reports and four white papers on the

science supporting their project. Since much of the information used to develop the NFHCP was considered proprietary by Plum Creek, the draft NFHCP was not shared outside the Services until publication of the DEIS.

Q. How does the public comment on an EIS/HCP? How do public comments affect an EIS/HCP?

The ESA requires public comment on an application for Incidental take Permit. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires public comment on certain NEPA documents. NEPA is a law requiring public disclosure and informed environmental decision-making for certain federal processes. An important component of NEPA is that it provides for public involvement to help define the Services' analysis of environmental impacts. The analysis of the impacts from the proposed action will be reported in the EIS — which is made available for public review and comment. Public comments must be reviewed and responded to before the Services complete processing of the HCP and Permit application for final Permit decision. The Services may not approve the proposed HCP or issue an Incidental Take Permit to Plum Creek until all public comments are reviewed and responded to.

Q. How may I get a copy of the DEIS/NFHCP?

Documents may be viewed on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's web site (<http://www.fws.gov/r1srbo/SRBO/PlumCk.htm>), or copies may be requested from the Services. Compact disc and hard-bound copies are available upon request. If you have questions, please phone *Ted Koch*, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at 208-378-5243; *Bob Ries*, National Marine Fisheries Service at 208-882-6148; or *Mike Jostrom*, Plum Creek Timber Company at 406-892-6280.

Q. What is the public comment period?

Public comments on the DEIS/NFHCP will be accepted December 17, 1999, through February 17, 2000. Comments may be provided at the Open House meetings January 11-20, 2000. Written comments to the Services must be postmarked by February 17, 2000, and they may be sent to Ted Koch, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, Idaho 83709, or to Bob Ries, National Marine Fisheries Service, 530 S. Asbury St., Suite 2, Moscow, Idaho 83843.

TERMS

EIS/DEIS = Environmental Impact Statement/Draft Environmental Impact Statement

HCP = Habitat Conservation Plan

NFHCP = Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan

DEIS/NFHCP = Combined Document

ESA = Endangered Species Act

Permit = Incidental Take Permit

FWS = U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

NMFS = National Marine Fisheries Service

The Services = FWS and NMFS, referred to together as the Permit action agencies

Plum Creek = Plum Creek Timber Co., L.P.

National Environmental Policy Act = NEPA

Environmental Assessment = EA

Environmental Impact Statement = EIS